

LEO O'DONOVAN, DISNEY'S PROVOCATIVE CHOICE

By Heather Salerno

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Leo J. O'Donovan just completed his sixth year as president of Georgetown University. What's he going to do now?

He's going to Disney World. O'Donovan, a Jesuit priest who leads the nation's oldest Catholic university, two weeks ago was elected to a two-year term on the Walt Disney Co.'s board of directors, at a time when Disney's products and corporate policies are drawing fire from some religious groups.

The announcement of O'Donovan's appointment came just two weeks after the Southern Baptist Convention, the country's largest Protestant church organization, passed a resolution calling for a boycott of Walt Disney theme parks, movies and merchandise. The group censured the company for granting benefits to partners of gay employees and hosting gay and lesbian theme nights. Its leaders said the group is worried that Disney -- the world's most recognized producer of family entertainment -- has veered away from emphasizing traditional family values.

O'Donovan said he wholeheartedly disagrees with this assessment of Disney.

"If I thought Disney were changing direction in any substantial way, I would, of course, have questions I would raise," he said. "I'll have a responsibility to offer good advice on the moral implications of some of the company's production, but I don't think I'll be the only one doing that."

So why is he joining Disney's board?

"This is an opportunity to influence a major American company that has tried to produce entertainment that is sustaining and enriching to family life."

The Baptist resolution is only one example of a number of conflicts in recent years between Disney and Christian groups. Last year, Catholics lambasted the company and its subsidiary, Miramax Films, for distributing the British film "Priest," a sympathetic portrayal of a homosexual priest. Disney caught some heat in October when it was revealed that the director of its movie "Powder" was a convicted child molester.

William Donohoe, president of the New York-based Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, said that as a result of these recent conflicts, "a lot of eyebrows went up" in the Catholic community at O'Donovan's appointment.

"One would hope {O'Donovan} would use his influence to change Disney. It would be a shame if the president of Georgetown University would accede to continue down the path Disney has mapped out for itself lately," Donohoe said. "There is a grave concern among Catholics that Disney has lost its moorings and is more concerned with the almighty dollar."

O'Donovan's decision to join Disney's board highlights the rift among Catholics over church doctrine and responsibilities of the clergy and church members. The Catholic Church does not condone homosexuality, but O'Donovan said Disney is following standard industry practices in granting benefits to domestic partners, not making an "ideological decision." As for films such as "Priest," O'Donovan said, "One can't judge a company or person by a single act or production, or we'd never lead lives or have businesses."

"I don't want to be moralistic or talk about moral requirements," O'Donovan said about his goals as a Disney board member. "But I do think entertainment, as well as education, becomes more humane and more significant when moral dimensions are considered. . . . I think a company will be more successful if they ask what their social impact is as they pursue their more immediate goals."

O'Donovan's connection to the Walt Disney Co. dates to 1989, when he was inducted as Georgetown's president and Disney Chairman Michael Eisner, whose son was a Georgetown student at the time, served on the college's board. The two became friends, and O'Donovan has served as an unofficial adviser to Eisner for several years.

Eisner holds O'Donovan in high esteem. "He is just a wise, renaissance, all-purpose, creative, educated man. And besides that, he has a perspective on things that bring diversity to the board," Eisner said in a telephone interview last week.

Eisner said he wanted to ask O'Donovan to join Disney's board earlier, but there were no openings. When Disney's acquisition of Capital Cities/ABC Inc. was completed in February, two new board positions were added, one of which Eisner asked O'Donovan to fill.

Eisner dismissed the notion that O'Donovan's appointment is a public relations maneuver designed to deflect criticism by religious conservatives, especially in the wake of the Baptist boycott.

"I asked him to the board about six or seven months ago, and he was formally elected at the last board meeting. The {Baptist} convention was days before that. It is ridiculous to put those things together," Eisner said. "You don't put someone on the board because of PR. {O'Donovan} is on the board for the long haul."

Experts said Disney's newest board member likely was selected because of his experience as an educator, not as an attempt to appease religious groups.

"It is unusual for a priest to be on the board of a corporation. But I presume the reason {O'Donovan} was selected was because he is the head of a university like Georgetown that thrives on intellectual creativity -- just like Disney," said Robert B. Stobaugh, a professor at Harvard Business School who is doing research on corporate boards of directors. "This appointment probably looks good for {Disney}, but they'll be judged by people for their actions rather than who is on their board."

And O'Donovan said he plans to speak his mind at Disney board meetings. "I think Michael {Eisner} and the other board members expect a special sensitivity from me on certain issues."

O'Donovan will attend his first board meeting in September at Disney World near Orlando, Fla. He will receive a \$30,000 annual honorarium from Disney, be reimbursed for travel expenses to the five board meetings and given 2,000 shares of Disney stock each year -- typical benefits for a board position with a large company.

But as a priest, O'Donovan is not allowed to own property or manage personal finances. It is possible the money would be used for a scholarship fund at Georgetown, although that decision would need to be approved by the rector of the university's Jesuit community.

CAPTION: LEO J. O'DONOVAN

* Age: 62

* Born: New York City

* Career: Ordained in the Society of Jesus in 1966; became president of Georgetown University in 1989.

* Education: Degrees from Georgetown University, Fordham University and Woodstock College; PhD in theology from the University of Munster, Germany; post-doctoral studies at the University of Chicago. Has also held a Fulbright Scholarship and a Danforth Fellowship.

* Other board appointments: Consortium on Financing Higher Education, National Council on the Arts of the National Endowment for the Arts, Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area, Riggs National Bank, Business Higher Education Forum of the American Council on Education.

CAPTION: "I think Michael {Eisner} and the other board members expect a special sensitivity from me ," says O'Donovan. Religious groups have criticized Disney for straying from traditional values.

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